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Training on the Cutting Edge

[Spring 2004 / Focus](#)

by Zachary Dobbins, Heidi Juel, Sue Mendelsohn, Roger Rouland, and Eliana Schonberg.

Innovative training at work in writing centers across the country.

Writing center consultants are leading busier and busier lives. As writing centers become standard fixtures in schools and communities, consultants are expected to enact educational, legislative and corporate change. However, while the demands on us are increasing, so are the tools we have at our disposal. Today's writing center consultant is presented with a smorgasbord of training alternatives both within our own centers and online. Tried and true training approaches are still with us—classes, workshops, staff meetings, role-playing, observations, and mentoring—but they are increasingly supplemented by these new possibilities.

In this article, we'll look at the spectrum of new training options and introduce you to centers that have found solutions that work. In our research, we found most efforts toward change are frequently undertaken at the local level by individual writing center directors. We are offering a call to bring training issues to the larger writing center community so that instead of simply reacting to social changes imposed on us from outside, we can act in concert to consciously shape the changes occurring.

New Demands

Changes in writing culture are spurring changes in our profession. The most obvious development is the proliferation of new technologies for writers. An increased technological presence requires that consultants now consult online, build Web sites, or sit down in-person with writers to demonstrate electronic research methods. Beyond technological advances, however, there are changes at work in academia. No longer is the writing center the sole domain of English or composition programs. As writing across the curriculum and writing within the disciplines programs grow, discipline-specific expertise is also becoming more of an asset among consultants. With a renewed interest in improving diversity in higher education, some centers are re-thinking ways to enhance diversity within the writing center itself. Pressure to change not only stems from within the institution, however. Increased use of state-mandated standardized testing for high school and college writing requires some writing centers to focus on externally determined benchmarks.

These external pressures are themselves partially sparked by changes in the working world: as corporate payrolls shrink, professionals no longer have the luxury of employing assistants to do their writing for them, and writing centers and educational institutions are striving to train professionals to respond to this reality. Corporate culture is also encouraging more group work, so writers must learn team-writing skills. Likewise, modes of corporate communication are

broadening, and writing consultants must now be experts on everything from document design to email etiquette. From the classroom to the boardroom, changes in writing culture are compelling writing consultants to prepare writers to meet new demands. But how will the consultants themselves prepare for this new challenge?

More to Learn

The scope of writing center training has broadened as trainers focus on preparing consultants to help writers negotiate shifts in academic and workplace cultures. Students and professionals are increasingly expected to be well-versed in responding to diversity. And writing center directors are responding by incorporating fresh critical approaches into consultant training.

- The increased awareness of diversity issues in higher education has led the Roth Writing Center at Connecticut College to integrate critical social theory into its training. This theoretical approach helps tutors at the predominately white college broaden their awareness of difference. "What we hope to do by training our students about the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class is to sensitize them to some of the issues that may come up in tutoring sessions," says Dr. Andrea Rossi, Roth Center director. Training is still designed to help students at the Center "in a standard, traditional way with writing in college; however, we are also training [tutors] to approach tutoring in a more open-minded, informed, and sensitized way that will help them to better understand their tutees, their tutees' papers, and ultimately themselves and their own writing and teaching," says Rossi.
- The Kent State University-Stark Campus Writing Center also recognizes that student writing itself often involves "confronting and negotiating difference," says Center Director Jay Sloan. Like the training at the Roth Writing Center, that at Kent State-Stark is designed to broaden consultants' awareness. "Most of the current scholarship on writing center pedagogy positions writing centers as 'comfort zones'," says Sloan. "As both a composition teacher and a writing center director, however, I have been worried that such an emphasis often simply evades more contested writing spaces." Instead, the KSUSC staff trains using a "contact zone" approach. (For more information on Sloan's work on "contact zones," please see his article

Trainers are also re-thinking ways to meet the needs of a media savvy writing population. For instance, writers today have greater contact with and knowledge of fields such as visual rhetoric, and writing center training is expanding to accommodate them.

- The Ball State University Writing Center has begun training its consultants to work with the visual components of texts, such as document design, format, and layout. Dr. Jackie Grutsch McKinney, BSU Writing Center director, argues that visual rhetoric is an area that traditional training sources have neglected. "I don't think I'm breaking ground with my methodology here, but [the training is addressing] a topic I haven't seen in any of the tutor training books. I think it's increasingly more important as how we create documents changes to help writers negotiate [visual rhetoric issues]."

New Collaborators

Email. Online chats. Cell phones. PDAs. Blogs. MOOs. Communication technology is making collaboration easier than ever before, changing the ways people connect in the workplace. This has two consequences for writing consultant training. First, the collaborative methods that writing consultants have been practicing for decades are now considered valuable in a wide range of professional settings: our skills are in demand. As a result, it is no longer just the faculty writing gurus and the most stellar student writers who are becoming writing consultants; more community volunteers, developing writers, and high school students are asking to be trained. Second, centers are closer than ever to one another, geographically and technologically. The prevalence of writing centers allows for greater collaboration among consultant trainers, many of whom can now take their staffs on training-related field trips to other nearby centers; technological advances also allow writing center trainers to engage in a fluid and affordable exchange of ideas across great distances via email and the Internet.

- By joining forces in an innovative tutor exchange program, Duke University and the University of North Carolina have bridged geography and methodology to build a more expansive writing center community. The exchange program begins with consultants from both universities together attending training workshops. Then the consultants “trade places”: first by visiting the other’s university and second by then becoming, for the day, a consultee rather than a consultant. Vicki Russell, director of Duke’s Writing Studio, describes the program’s multiple goals. “This collaboration has helped tutors understand a tutoring world outside their own and helped them empathize with students who come to talk about their writing with someone who is usually a stranger.” Duke Writing Studio Consultant Mandakini Dubey explains that “the trip to the UNC center made me a little more aware of our own relative institutional privilege,” adding that the “UNC writing center . . . offers a different variety of tutoring practices.” In these ways, “by fostering a reflective and theoretically informed environment . . . [the exchange] encourages us to think about our tutorial approaches and reconsider how they relate to the specific context of our home institution.”

The exchange program has other advantages, too. Russell says that this “collaborative model is particularly important in a tight budget climate. It offers writing centers within close geographic proximity an opportunity to create their own mini organization and share resources.” Another key feature of the exchange program is that the training is ongoing, even recursive. Russell explains: “Our collaboration has extended beyond this exchange to social events together; workshops funded by the Robertson Foundation, which fosters collaborative work between Duke and UNC; joint presentations at professional conferences; and the like.” It is its community-building vision that makes this consultant training program especially innovative. The exchange program, Russell concludes, “seems to be an excellent way to help us appreciate the fact we are part of a much larger writing center community, one with similar but not identical goals and practices.”

Consultant trainers are also finding that they don’t always have to look off campus to shake up their training practices. Conventional boundaries for who

receives training and who offers it are also expanding.

- A tenet of writing center practice is that it makes consultants better teachers and better writers. Centers at New School University and the Washington State University are exploring the potential of this notion by broadening the populations that receive their training. The New School University Writing Center has opened up its consultant training program to all graduate students and faculty members on campus, not just those employed by the writing center. Director Roban Torosyan opened his program in order to “encourage a growing culture of teaching and learning at the university, to help along wider discussions of practical methods and theoretical approaches to helping people learn.” The Washington State Writing Center offers two courses for developing writers. For their panel at the IWCA-NCPTW Conference, Washington State Writing Center Staff, Theresa Ireton, Lisa Johnson, and Karen Weathermon used the metaphor of the ouroboros, the dragon that bites its own tail, to capture the learning-teaching symbiosis.
- Increasingly, breaking ground in how writing centers train involves the recognition that some of the better tutor trainers are consultants themselves. In fact, some writing center directors like Paula Gillespie of Marquette University suggest that directors are the last people who should train in certain areas. “I figured [out] long ago that if I teach the section on grammar, it would be deadly. But lots of the tutors-in-training are education majors, and many are creative and fun-loving, so they have invented innovative ways to get the grammar lesson across.” One such response to grammar training last year, says Gillespie, was an interactive event in which tutors performed as parts of speech in a play they designed. The play was so successful that Gillespie recorded it for use in future training sessions.

So whether training takes the form of a listserv or the transplanting of a consultant from his or her comfort zone to an unfamiliar setting, it promotes wider participation, which is not just a quantitative improvement but a qualitative one. Writing centers are inviting more people into the writing center community, bringing new perspectives and challenging existing ones.

How Technology Fits

At first glance it would be easy to mistake many writing centers for computer labs; the pervasiveness of computing technology is allowing writing consultants to be free agents in their training in ways they never could before. In the past, consultants’ training was limited to whatever books and training programs their writing centers provided. Now many centers post their training resources on the Web. (See “Get Online with Training” in this issue of Praxis for more information.)

- The **University of Richmond Writing Center** and the **Dartmouth College Composition Center** each host Web sites that feature videos of mock consultations and discussion questions. Visitors to their sites can watch people act out challenging situations that commonly come up during consultations. The University of Texas at Austin Undergraduate Writing Center makes available to its staff an online video archive of its training workshops and several actual consultations. Since the logistics of observing consultations are difficult for its large staff, the videos help

expose their consultants to real consultations during their training. The International Writing Centers Association [Web site](#) also lists links to seven centers' consultant handbooks. With the click of a mouse consultants can experience diverse training resources developed by centers thousands of miles away.

In addition, listservs, bulletin boards, and blogs are opening the way for consultants everywhere to discuss professional issues outside of more official channels, offering space for exploration and dissent. Despite the possibilities they open up, however, these resources, have yet to attract broad participation nationally and internationally.

- [PeerCentered](#) is a blog for writing consultants. The [message board](#) in *The Dangling Modifier*, an e-newsletter for writing consultants, and the peer tutors [discussion forum](#) on the IWCA Web site also offer forums for discussion. While [WCenter](#), a listserv used mostly by writing center administrators, hosts lively exchanges, no corollary listserv for consultants has yet been established.

Although more free-form ways of training consultants through technology are still finding their audiences, a number of writing center directors are choosing to use Web site training resources like [Tutor.edu](#) as one component of their training programs. Directors appreciate the flexibility and cost efficiency of the Web.

- [Tutor.edu](#) is an online training manual developed by Montreat College, Milligan College, King College, Mars Hill College, and Carson-Newman College with grant funding from the Appalachian College Association. Katie Vande Brake of King College explains that the five colleges needed to improve consultant training in their centers and saw Tutor.edu as a solution that would be both time efficient and inexpensive for small schools. "All of us had regular teaching loads in addition to supervising the writing center. So, Tutor.edu was designed with faculty like us in mind. . . . Money for writing center projects was also a problem for all our schools; textbooks cost money, but the Web is free." As Virginia Bower, director of the Mars Hill College Writing Center, describes, "the benefits of using the on-line manual are many: tutors can make use of it from any Internet-accessed computer. Many times I'll assign a particular module for my tutors and designate one tutor to lead a discussion on it. Another advantage is that the manual can be updated/revised at any time at very little expense (unlike a book)." Betty Sue James, director of the Writing Center at Montreat College, agrees that the main benefits to the online tutor manual from her tutors' perspectives are its accessibility, availability, and convenience. Although it was originally designed to meet local needs, Tutor.edu now serves as a training resource for centers across the world. Kim McMurtry, former director of Montreat College Writing Center, reports that centers ranging from Maple Woods Community College in Missouri to Massey University in New Zealand have used the site to train their consultants.

While computer-based training activities cannot teach people skills as effectively as observations, staff meetings, and the like, they make collaborative training easier than ever before. And Internet training resources have the potential to give consultants more control over their own professional development.

Training Enacts Change

Why should a writing consultant in, say, Bulgaria care about the ways consultants in a writing lab in Appalachia are training? Consultant training trends reflect the contemporary institutional and social pressures on writing centers and writers. These are decidedly not local concerns. Training tacitly asks us to enact a set of values and theories and by understanding how our colleagues in other centers train, we make those ideas explicit. Consultants learn how the writing center world is interacting with the worlds of politics, business, economics, and so on. We become conscious practitioners who understand—and thus have the power to interrogate and shape—the values and theories we are trained to perform in our work with writers.

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